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Bridging the Great Divide

A Cryptologist Encounters the Human Side of Intelligence

Thomas R. Johnson

As an ex-cryptologist, I look at HUMINT from my own blinkered past. What you are about to read is how HUMINTers are viewed by a refugee from the American cryptologic empire. Despite our vastly different worlds, the stepped-up challenges of intelligence collection in today's complex, technologically sophisticated, and fast-paced world require unprecedented collaboration between the National Security Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency. (U)

The Empire that I Once Served (U)

To begin with, it helps to understand where I stood (or sat) for most of my career. For those who have not worked their entire lives in the cryptologic community, the world of signals intelligence takes a certain amount of getting used to. (U)

Back in NSA's heyday, it ran the largest American intelligence system.

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NSA (b)(3)- 50 USC 3024 (i)
NSA (b)(3)- P.L. 86-36

The SIGINT world was huge. At the empire's peak, almost 100,000 American cryptologists worked at _____ locations. When they needed sites from which to operate, they got them. _____ (S)

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When I worked for NSA, I thought cryptology was the enter of the universe. The cryptologic record in World War II had become a thing of envy to intelligence professionals. Since 1945, SIGINT had acquired increasing prominence and authenticity in presidential administrations. It was clear to me when I studied trends during the 1970s and 1980s that the cryptologic world—the

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world of "technical intelligence"—had replaced the world of spies. (U)

Through the post-World War II decades, the influence of the cryptologists on American policymakers rose steadily, hitting its apparent peak in the late 1970s. President Carter, reluctant at first, came to rely on SIGINT to a greater degree than any American president ever had. During his presidency [ ] was the most important intelligence objective, and "national technical means of verification" chiefly meant SIGINT and overhead imagery. Later in the decade, when the President's attention turned to [ ] Afghanistan, SIGINT again fed his appetite. [1] (S)

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Carter probably liked SIGINT because it was clean. It did not involve "messy" human assets, the covert exchange of money, or clandestine meetings on foreign soil. We did not have to pay foreigners to betray their countries —their own communications did the job for us. SIGINT involved no problems of verification—it collected the sources' own thoughts, in their own words. Even Stansfield Turner, Carter's Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), who was at war with NSA director Bobby Inman for his entire four years at CIA, admitted that he relied on technical intelligence. Turner's dictum was: "Never send a spy when you can get the information you want by technical means." [2] He might not have liked Inman, but it was Inman to whom he turned for his best information. For the cryptologists, it was their finest hour since 1945. (U)

My Journey to the Antipodes (U)

Those days were long gone when, in late career, I decided to make a switch. Twenty years had passed since 1979, the height of American cryptologic Cold War success. Perhaps it was time to move on, to find out what the other INTs were doing. (U)

My trip from the world of SIGINT to the world of covert human intelligence (HUMINT) took me only 35 miles—from Fort Meade, Maryland, to Langley, Virginia. I could make the trip in under an hour, even through legendary Beltway traffic. But the SIGINT world that vanished from my rearview mirror was replaced by one so different that I have not yet fully comprehended the changes. (U)

I knew some of what to expect, because I had had a brief tour with CIA several years earlier. At that time, my first 24 hours stuck in my mind because they had not gone well. That first day, I checked in, got my desk, and began work. At quitting time, I quit. I locked up my classified material and left the office, with yellow post-it notes strewn around the desk. (U)

The first thing I noticed the next morning was the absence of those post-it notes. I made a closer check of my desk and found that it had been swept clean—only the telephone remained. Left behind was a curt note from the security officer saying that she had taken possession of everything. I was to report to her office. (U)

"Well!" I said, "What right do you have to go swiping my calendar pad and telephone list finder?" She stormed back with questions about the names in the list finder. Who were those people, and why were their names in there? Didn't I know that I could be compromising sources? And what were all those appointments on my calendar? All that material was sensitive, and should have been locked up. This was a security violation. (U)

That was my first lesson about HUMINT. The most sensitive information was about human

assets. Compromise those, and we would lose not only the information they gave us, but the assets themselves. I had never thought of it that way. Fact was, I didn't have any assets, didn't know any foreigners, and wasn't in touch with any clandestine sources. The phone numbers in my list finder were for the bank, the barbershop, and the laundry. But there was no point explaining that to her. I began locking up my calendar and telephone list finder at night. (U)

Eight years later, when I once again made the trek to Langley, it was under very different circumstances. I had reverted to a former life as an historian, and my job was to compile the history of certain clandestine operations. Although each had a cryptologic component, they were basically Directorate of Operations (DO) projects. So, for the first time, I began to learn what the DO was all about. (U)

The Nature of the HUMINT Business (U)

One of the first differences I noticed was the lack of "cleanliness." DO collection was dirty. Case officers had one mission—to recruit spies. They were to go out and find the Aldrich Ameses and Rick Hanssens of foreign countries. [3] Reading DO case files, I could see some common threads that struck home. They all reinforced the messy nature of HUMINT. (U)

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Moral ambiguity. The demands of clandestine work are pretty hard to reconcile with our own values. This is one of the few occupations in which criminality is not only legal, it is rewarded. It must be difficult sometimes to keep one's moral compass pointed north. The shift from job to family and local community life is probably jarring. Occupations like this induce a certain schizophrenia. One CIA officer turned the golden rule on its ear when he wrote his own credo: "Admit nothing, deny everything, and make counter-charges." This is probably **not** what he learned in Sunday school. (U)

Concepts of right and wrong bear only a tenuous relationship to the idea of "legality." CIA officers operate "legally" in foreign countries according to American law, but not according to foreign law. Do it, but don't get caught, is the guiding principle. And what is "legal" and "illegal" shifts when one travels back and forth between the United States and foreign soil. Most Americans don't have to deal with this. (U)

There is a certain extraterritoriality involved. In recent years, the Justice Department has extended American law beyond its borders—now it is okay to capture and bring back foreign malefactors to American soil for trial in American courts. They are often tried for activities that their own countries pay them to do. (U)

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Operating in a sub-world. If you want to become a case officer, you must be prepared to become a bottom-feeder. Officers in the Clandestine Service make a living off countries in chaos. They constantly fish in troubled waters.

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The SIGINT World in Perspective (U)

Cryptology, by comparison, is as clean as a freshly laundered shirt. Sitting in a sterile, windowless blockhouse bristling with antennas, the SIGINTer never sees the adversaries. It is a technological business. Signals are picked out of the ether, strained through digital sieves, sifted at the other end to determine what is useable, and sent to the people who translate, analyze, and report. The intercept floor resembles a laboratory or a high-tech "clean room" with lots of gizmos and people in clean military uniforms listening intently to radios. It is far from a back alley in a dirty foreign capital that reeks of discarded vegetable peelings. You may as well be in Silicon Valley. (U)

In that SIGINT blockhouse, there is very little moral ambiguity— there is barely a recognition that what you are doing is part of foreign intelligence collection. Little connects one mentally with what we traditionally regard as espionage. On occasions when I have questioned NSA audiences, most refuse to believe that they are engaged in spying. That, they feel, is the province of those people south of the Potomac. *They are the spies*. (U)

"Techniques" is the term that NSA uses to describes how it goes about its work, while "Tradecraft" is always associated with CIA.

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Why We Need Each Other   (U)

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The days of splendid isolation are gone. The demands of modern intelligence require increasing integration. Readers of an intelligence product are generally unaware of how much cooperation went on behind the scenes to make the report possible. (U)

I've heard it said that NSA and CIA are the dogs and cats of the Intelligence Community—always fighting. How could they ever get together? The fact is that they have been getting together in fits and starts for many years. The need for intelligence integration has never been starker. The fact is that if we want to keep a viable intelligence system, we will have to continue to strengthen collaboration. (U)

Moral Ambiguity, meet Mr. Clean. Mr. Clean, meet your savior. (U)

Footnotes:

[1] Stansfield Turner, *Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), pp. 90-98. (U)

[2] Turner, p. 639. (U)

[3] Aldrich Ames, the CIA mole arrested in 1994, and Robert Hanssen, the FBI spy arrested in 2001, both drew life sentences in federal custody. (U)

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[5] Apocryphal words attributed to Jim Farley, Franklin Roosevelt's campaign manager, seem to apply here: "He may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch." (U)

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